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OUTDOOR EDUCATION--A METHOD OF TEACHING.

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OUTDOOR LEARNING IS DEFINED IN THIS ARTICLE AS A METHOD OF LEARNING WHICH EXPLORES THE ADVANTAGES OF A CHILD'S INVOLVEMENT WITH NATURE. HIGH MOTIVATION, SOUND ENRICHMENT, AND PERSONAL AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT ARE SEEN AS OUTCOMES OF AN OUTDOOR EDUCATION PROGRAM. OUTDOOR RESOURCES CAN BE UTILIZED IN ANY COURSE AT ANY GRADE LEVEL IN ANY SCHOOL. A CONDENSATION OF THIS ARTICLE, ENTITLED "EDUCATION COMES ALIVE OUTDOORS," WAS PUBLISHED IN THE "NEA JOURNAL," APRIL 1967. (SF)

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"Outdoor Education--A Method of Teaching"

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"Studying among the things you're studying helps you understand them better." While these words of sixth grader Rose Anne may seem a bit redundant, she was unknowingly giving expression to an important concept in learning theory. She and her classmates had just returned from a week at the Outdoor School, a regular part of the curriculum for nearly every sixth-grade child in populous Los Angeles County. Enthusiasm bubbled as they described their experiences. "We learned to identify plants and animals and other things." "When we studied water, we waded in it." "We used a can and funnel to measure the rain." "We learned about things I never heard of before."

The reaction of these youngsters--honest excitement about learning--can be found in every school with outdoor education as part of its regular program. Children not only discover that learning can be fun, but in an outdoor setting they learn more quickly and retain what they learn longer. Recognizing this, it is difficult to understand why teachers, schools, and school systems seem to resist adding outdoor experiences to those they now provide.

Every school--large or small, central city or open country--is surrounded by an outdoor laboratory. It is there. It offers a continuous invitation to teachers searching for a way to motivate reluctant learners and a wealth of enriching experiences precisely suited to the gifted, the slow, the culturally deprived, and the physically handicapped. An almost limitless variety of instructional materials is available at virtually no cost.

Providing children with opportunities to learn through first-hand outdoor experience is not new. It has been part of the program for schools in Los Angeles and Riverside Counties and other places in California for nearly twenty years, and individual school systems in New Jersey, Maryland, Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, Washington, and Oregon have had programs in operation at least as long. It is doubtful that any other school undertaking has had such universal success in generating pupil interest. Outdoor experiences have a contageous quality. If permitted, they will find their way into every course and classroom. It is indeed rare to find a school willing to discontinue an outdoor program once it has been

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initiated.

The number of schools now including outdoor experiences in their program of instruction is relatively limited, but in the past year the educational potential of such activities seems to have been rediscovered. A number of ESEA Title III projects are initiating programs. Some communities are providing outdoor experiences as part of the local Head Start program. Some are providing them for the educationally disadvantaged under Title I. Still other schools are developing programs on their own without special financial help.

What a school's outdoor education program includes and the way it is conducted depends largely upon how people locally conceive its potential and what specific resources or facilities are available. Other than opening the classroom door to all that is outside, there is no single pattern; no two programs are exactly alike.

Some school systems transport class groups to a park or other nature center where the regular teacher or a specialized staff directs children's activities. An ocean center is being developed by the Robert W. Traip Academy in Kittery, Maine, for example, with emphasis on marine biology and oceanography. Middletown Township, New Jersey, children study some of the mysteries of the ocean at the Spermaceti Cove Interpretive Center in Sandy Hook State Park. New York City children, some of whom have never before been out of a concrete habitat, now can learn about photosynthesis, soil composition, and the causes of water pollution and how it might be prevented when they visit the High Rock Park Nature Conservation Center on Staten Island. With staff naturalists at the center available to provide the instruction, teachers are free to participate and study with the children, and many share with their youngsters the novelty of the nature environment and the excitement of discovery.

A variation to transporting children to a center is developing a resource area as a part of the school itself. The Southwest Licking School District in Pataskala, Ohio, has its junior and senior high buildings on an 83-acre site, 30 acres of which are woods used as a forest-land laboratory. Foreign language, home economics, art, and other class groups use this woodland area in various ways. The agriculture classes have planted windbreaks,

built diversion ditches, and completed other conservation projects. They also manage the woodlot according to the best forestry management practices.

The Jefferson County School District in Colorado has developed camp-type facilities on a 550-acre site at the foot of Mt. Evans. Each week during the school year groups of children use this facility for a camping experience and to study conservation, astronomy, biology, botany, creative writing, music, and art. Along with the regular teachers and special staff, a retired forester and a retired geologist are available as "specialists in residence." The Highline School District in Seattle operates a camp facility in the Cascades; Frederick County, Maryland, schools utilize a camp in the Appalachian foothills near Camp David; similar facilities are being developed for the ten-county area of northern Idaho. In Snohomish County, Washington, schools have access to both Camp Silverton in the mountains and a marine laboratory on Puget Sound.

Programs which capitalize on children's interest in nature and natural phenomena do not depend on having access to a nature center, camp, or other special area, however. A nearby park, museum, swamp, pond, primitive area, beach, or the immediate school grounds are rich with possibilities. A rock quarry, an ant hill, a fallen tree, or a clump of grass struggling its way through the asphalt playground offer opportunities for insight and understanding. Outdoor resources can be utilized in any course at any grade level in any school.

One of the most stimulating instructional programs to be found anywhere--the Natural Science and Conservation course offered to junior high students in McPherson, Kansas--operates without a special outdoor laboratory. Supplemented by occasional field trips to natural areas in and around the community, this program consists largely of bringing the outdoors into the classroom. Films, slides, models, collections, live specimens, and a host of books, charts, and other items fill the classroom where children work. They observe, examine, handle, read, study, and raise questions. Resource specialists (State Fish and Game, Soil Conservation, and many more--all eager, free, and available) are frequent guest instructors. Each child responds individually, spontaneously, and completely. Their experiences and activities are a lesson from beginning to end.

To capsulize descriptions of programs is to trim away their color and disguise their depth. A more detailed accounting of what teachers and children actually do in any of the programs mentioned above, how they work together, and how these experiences relate to broad educational goals would emphasize a most important reality: outdoor education is not a specific course or separate area of study; it is a method of teaching. The rich resources of nature and outdoor activities can apply to all subject matter areas.

In many school programs, the initiation of an outdoor emphasis depends on the enthusiasm, persistence, and resourcefulness--and often persuasiveness--of an individual teacher. If that teacher is assigned to a particular subject area or grade level, he naturally introduces pupils to outdoor participation in that area of the school program. And since the types of activities planned by a biology teacher would likely differ from those a physical education or art teacher might develop, the concept of outdoor education often has a distinctly "local" flavor. This adds to, if indeed it is not largely responsible for, the variations which exist among school programs.

The opportunities for developing an outdoor laboratory approach to science are immediately obvious. They are so great that it is difficult to understand a classroom-and-textbook-centered program in biology, geology, astronomy, botany, horticulture, or any of the aspects of conservation. To follow a traditional approach is simply to turn away from the kinds of teaching materials and resources that can make learning in these subject fields a true adventure of exploration, observation, and discovery. Utilizing the out-of-doors gives children an opportunity to deal with real things--planting hatchery-reared trout in a river, watching the operation of a turbine as it generates hydroelectric power, discovering that some plants grow better in the shade while others like sunshine, observing a demonstration of the equipment used in fighting forest fires, and feeding birds in winter. Science in a nature environment comes alive.

Schools which provide a camping experience for children usually include a wide variety of science-related activities in their program, but equal emphasis tends to be given to the personal and social development of individual youngsters. For many children the "school camp" is their first experience in group living outside the family. By sharing responsibilitie

in the camp setting, these children are involved in a type of democratic living and cooperation that frequently produces observable behavior differences after they return to their home and school. Teachers who accompany their class groups to the camp are almost always amazed by how this program of activities can in a single week draw out the withdrawn, enlist the cooperation of the uncooperative, and broaden the interests of the self-centered. Because the camping program is often a week-long, 24-hour-a-day operation, proper rest, a balanced diet, fresh air, and happy surroundings may well be a new experience for some.

Greatest of all are the contributions the outdoor environment can make to the development of aesthetic values. Children develop a perceptiveness that can bring the sounds and beauty of nature to life in their expressions of art, music, and drama. Each will react differently, of course. Some see a stone bridge or hollow tree only for what they are, while others build imaginatively on what is actually observed. In paint and color, sound and play they respond. They are not hemmed in. They discover how strange and exhilarative freedom feels and come to know what satisfaction means.

In words, too, oral and written, children express themselves, and somehow the words come easier when you talk about or describe real things. All experiences become background for reading, for understanding literature, and for creative writing. Admittedly nature is commonplace--it has been around day after day, century after century. But permitting and encouraging them to smell, hear, taste, and feel it as a part of "school" can turn drabness into enchantment. Nature's unexplainable magnetism captures both children and adults. Their reaction is almost spiritual. This feeling shines through in the few lines little Cynthia Hewson wrote after her sixth-grade class had visited an outdoor classroom in the Sierras. She had a chance to see snow for the first time, "close up" and "lots of it."

I never knew the world in white
So beautiful could be
As I have seen it here today.
A new Earth, Bride of a new Heaven,
Has been revealed to me.

Just as direct learning experiences in an outdoor setting are suited to every subject area in the school program, they are appropriate for <u>all</u> children, for each child. The

excitement a third grader feels when he uncovers a nest of turtle eggs shows equally on the face of a blind student "seeing" a plant through touch and description by his teacher. Severely mentally retarded youngsters have demonstrated in a camp situation how rapidly they can adjust, feel comfortable, and respond to a teacher they did not previously know. Fear and uncertainty disappear. The circumstances fit just as well the needs of an honors group in science as they pursue individual research projects ranging from an inventory of local geologic formations to determining the impact of insecticides on the habits of migratory birds. And there is no better description of how outdoor experiences can contribute to reading readiness than Nancy Wagner's "160-Acre Kindergarten," which appeared in the February 1967 issue of the NEA Journal. Any who are doubtful about how the out-of-doors inspires children's creativity might turn to the article on poetry in that same issue. It is more than coincidence that the poems reported have the sea, trees, clouds, snow, leaves, and flowers as their theme.

The value of including outdoor activities in the instructional program is particularly observable in children's attitudes. Learning by discovery with an emphasis on understanding is truly a challenge--they accept it, they like it, and fully engage themselves in the learning process. They bring quantities of instructional materials to school--unsolicited armloads, paper bags full, and in makeshift cages. Their school doesn't even seem like "school" any longer. There are no truancies, no dropouts. Every child is a contributor. Some who have performed poorly in academic work find new opportunities for success and recognition. They way they feel was expressed simply by eleven-year-old Deborah: "I almost wish I could take the sixth grade over again."

What a rare opportunity it is to be a teacher. For to help a child see and understand his environment more clearly, to be more aware, is to help him find himself. So open wide the classroom door! Push the walls outward! The reward is satisfaction....a sense of the beauty and order of things and of one's own role in it all.